

*THE GOOD LUCK  
OF RIGHT NOW*

*MATTHEW QUICK*

PICADOR

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.

—THE DALAI LAMA

Certainly there have been better actors than me who have had no careers. Why? I don't know.

—RICHARD GERE

*THE YOU-ME RICHARD GERE OF PRETENDING*

Dear Mr. Richard Gere,

In Mom's underwear drawer—as I was separating her “personal” clothes from the “lightly used” articles I could donate to the local thrift shop—I found a letter you wrote.

As you will recall, your letter was about the 2008 Olympics held in Beijing, China—you were advocating for a boycott because of the crimes and atrocities the Chinese government committed against Tibet.

Don't worry.

I'm not one of those “crazy types.”

I immediately realized that this was a form letter you sent out to millions of people through your charitable organization, but Mom was a good enough pretender to believe you had personally signed the letter specifically to her, which is most likely why she saved it—believing you had touched the paper with your hands, licked the envelope with your tongue—imagining the paper represented a tangible link to you . . . that maybe a few of your cells, microscopic bits of

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your DNA, were with her whenever she held the letter and envelope.

Mom was your biggest fan, and a seasoned pretender.

“There’s his name written in cursive,” I remember her saying to me, poking the paper with her index finger. “From Richard Gere! Movie star *RICHARD GERE!*”

Mom liked to celebrate the little things. Like finding a forgotten wrinkled dollar in a lint-ridden coat pocket, or when there was no line at the post office and the stamp sellers were up for smiles and polite conversation, or when it was cool enough to sit out back during a hot summer—when the temperature dips dramatically at night even though the weatherman has predicted unbearable humidity and heat, and therefore the evening becomes an unexpected gift.

“Come enjoy the strange cool air, Bartholomew,” Mom would say, and we’d sit outside and smile at each other like we’d won the lottery.

Mom could make small things seem miraculous. That was her talent.

Richard Gere, perhaps you have already labeled Mom as weird, pixilated—most people did.

Before she got sick, she never gained or lost weight; she never purchased new clothes for herself, and therefore was perpetually stuck in mideighties fashions; she smelled like the mothballs she kept in her drawers and closet, and her hair was usually flattened on the side she rested against her pillow (almost always the left).

Mom didn’t know that computer printers could easily reproduce signatures, because she was too old to have ever em-

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ployed modern technology. Toward the end, she used to say that “computers were condemned by the Book of Revelations,” but Father McNamee told me it’s not true, although we could let Mom believe it was.

I’d never seen her so happy as she was the day your letter arrived.

As you might have gathered, Mom wasn’t all there during the last few years of her life, and by the very end extreme dementia had set in, which made it hard to distinguish the pretending of her final days from the real world.

Everything blurred over time.

During her good moments—if you can believe it—she actually used to think (pretend?) that I was you, that Richard Gere was living with her, taking care of her, which must have been a welcome alternative to the truth: that her ordinary unaccomplished son was her primary caregiver.

“What will we be having for dinner tonight, Richard?” she’d say. “Such a pleasure to finally spend so much time with you, Richard.”

It was like when I was a boy and we’d pretend we were eating dinner with a famous guest—Ronald Reagan, Saint Francis, Mickey Mouse, Ed McMahon, Mary Lou Retton—occupying one of the two seats in the kitchen that were always empty, except when Father McNamee visited.

As I previously stated, Mom was quite a fan of yours—you probably visited our kitchen table before, but to be honest, I don’t remember a specific Richard Gere visit from childhood. Regardless, I indulged her and played my role, so you were manifested through me, even though I’m not as

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handsome, and therefore made a poor stand-in. I hope you don't mind my having invoked you without your permission. It was a simple thing that gave Mom great pleasure. Her face lit up like the Wanamaker's Christmas Light Show every time you came to visit. And after the failed chemo and brain surgery, and the awful sick, retching aftermath, it was hard to get her to smile or be happy about anything, which is why I went along with the game of you and me becoming we.

It started one night after we watched our well-worn VCR copy of *Pretty Woman*, one of Mom's favorite movies.

As the end credits rolled, she patted my arm and said, "I'm going to bed now, Richard."

I looked at her, and she smiled almost mischievously—like I'd seen the sexy fast girls do with their shiny painted lips back when I was in high school. That salacious smile made me feel nauseated, because I knew it meant trouble. It was so unlike Mom too. It was the beginning of living with a stranger.

I said, "Why did you call me *Richard*?"

She laid her hand gently on my thigh, and in this very flirtatious girlish voice, while batting her eyelids, she said, "Because that's your name, silly."

During the thirty-eight years we had known each other, Mom had never once before called me "silly."

The tiny angry man in my stomach pounded my liver with his fists.

I knew we were in trouble.

"Mom, it's me—Bartholomew. Your only son."

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When I looked into her eyes, she didn't seem to see me. It was like she was having a vision—seeing what I could not.

It made me wonder if Mom had used some sort of womanly witchcraft and turned me into you somehow.

That we—you and me—had become one in her mind.

Richard Gere.

Bartholomew Neil.

We.

Mom took her hand off my thigh and said, “You're a handsome man, Richard, the love of my life even, but I'm not going to make the same mistake twice. You made your choice, so you'll just have to sleep on the couch. See you in the morning.” Then she floated up the stairs, moving quicker than she had in months.

She looked ecstatic.

Like the haloed saints depicted in stained glass at Saint Gabriel's, Mom seemed to be guided by divinity. Her madness appeared holy. She was bathed in light.

As uncomfortable as that exchange was, I liked seeing Mom lit up. Happy. And pretending has always been easy for me. I have pretended my entire life. Plus there was the game from my childhood, so I had certainly practiced.

Somehow—because who can say exactly how these things come to be—over many days and weeks, Mom and I slipped into a routine.

We both began pretending.

She pretended I was you, Richard Gere.

I pretended Mom wasn't losing her mind.

I pretended she wasn't going to die.

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I pretended I wouldn't have to figure out life without her. Things escalated, as they say.

By the time she was confined to the pullout bed in the living room with a morphine pain pump spiking her arm, I was playing you twenty-four hours a day, even when Mom was unconscious, because it helped me, as I faithfully pushed the button every time she grimaced.

To her I was no longer Bartholomew, but Richard.

So I decided I would indeed be Richard and give Bartholomew some well-deserved time off, if that makes any sense to you, Mr. Gere. Bartholomew had been working overtime as his mother's son for almost four decades. Bartholomew had been emotionally skinned alive, beheaded, and crucified upside down, just like his apostle namesake, according to various legends, only metaphorically—and in the modern world of today and right now.

Being Richard Gere was like pushing my own mental morphine pain pump.

I was a better man when I was you—more confident, more in control, surer of myself than I have ever been.

The hospice workers went along with my ruse. I firmly instructed them to call me Richard whenever we were in the room with Mom. They looked at me like I was crazy, but they did as I asked, because they were hired help.

Hospice workers took care of Mom only because they were being paid. I wasn't under any illusion that these people cared about us. They glanced at their cell phone clocks fifty times an hour and always looked so relieved when they put on their coats at the end of their shifts—like departing from



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us was akin to attending a wonderful party, like walking out of a morgue and into the Oscars.

When Mom was sleeping, the hospice workers sometimes called me Mr. Neil, but whenever she was awake I was you, Richard, and they were doing as I asked because of the money they were being paid by the insurance company. They even used a very formal, reverent tone when they addressed us. “Can we do anything to make your mother more comfortable, Richard?” they’d say whenever she was awake, although they never once called me Mr. Gere, which was okay with me, since you and Mom were on a first-name basis from the start.

I want you to know that Mom truly loved watching the Olympics. She never missed the games—she used to watch with her mother too—and watching gave her such great pleasure, maybe because she never left the Philadelphia area during her seventy-one years on earth. She used to say that watching the Olympics was like taking a foreign vacation every four years, even after they switched the winter and summer games to different years, and therefore the Olympics occurred every two years, which I’m sure you know already.

(Sorry for being redundant, but I am writing to you as Bartholomew Neil—unlike you in every way imaginable. I hope you will bear with me and forgive me my commonness. I am not pretending to be Richard Gere at the time of writing. I am much more eloquent when I am you. MUCH. Bartholomew Neil is no movie star; Bartholomew Neil has never had sex with a supermodel; Bartholomew Neil never

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even escaped the city in which you and I were born, Richard Gere, the City of Brotherly Love; Bartholomew Neil is sadly intimate with these facts. And Bartholomew Neil is not much of a writer either, which you have already surmised.)

Mom loved gymnastics, especially the triangle-torsoed men, who “moved like warrior angels.” She clapped until her palms were pink whenever someone did the iron cross on the rings. That was her favorite. “Strong as Jesus on his worst day,” she’d say. And she even watched the opening and closing ceremonies—every second. Every Olympic event they televised, Mom watched.

But when she received your letter—the one I mentioned earlier, outlining the atrocities committed against Tibet by the Chinese government—she decided not to watch the Olympics set in China, which was a great sacrifice for her.

“Richard Gere is right! We should be sending the People’s Republic of China a message! Horrible! What they are doing to the Tibetan people. Why doesn’t anyone care about basic human rights?” Mom said.

I must admit that—being far more pessimistic, resigned, and apathetic than Mom ever was—I argued futilely *for* watching the Olympics. (Please forgive me, Mr. Gere. I had little faith back then.) I said that our watching or not watching wouldn’t even be documented, let alone have any impact on foreign relations whatsoever—“China won’t even know we aren’t watching! Our boycott will be pointless!” I protested—but Mom believed in you and your cause, Mr. Gere. She did what you asked, because she loved you and had the faith of a child.

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This meant I did not get to see the Olympics either, and I was initially perturbed, as this was a traditional mother-son activity in the Neil household, but I got over that long ago. Now I am wondering if Mom's boycott, her death, and my finding the letter you wrote her—maybe these things mean you and I are meant to be linked in some important cosmic way.

Maybe you are meant to help me, Richard Gere, now that Mom is gone.

Maybe this is all part of her vision—her faith coming to fruition.

Maybe you, Richard Gere, are Mom's legacy to me!

Perhaps you and I are truly meant to become WE.

To further prove the synchronicity of all this (have you read Jung? I actually have. Are you surprised?), Mom booted the Chinese unmercifully at the 2010 Vancouver games—even the jumping and pirouetting Chinese figure skaters, who were so graceful—which was just before I began to notice the dementia, if memory serves.

It didn't happen all at once, but started with little things like forgetting names of people we saw on our daily errands, leaving the oven on overnight, forgetting what day it was, getting lost in the neighborhood where she lived her entire life, and misplacing her glasses repetitively, often on the top of her head—small everyday lapses.

(She never forgot you, though, Richard Gere. She talked to you-me daily. Another sign. Never once did she forget the name Richard.)

To be honest, I'm not really sure when her mental decline

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began, as I pretended not to notice for a long time. I've never been particularly good with change. And I didn't think of giving in to Mom's madness and being you until much later. I am slow to the dance, always late for the cosmic ball, as wiser people like you undoubtedly say.

The doctors told me that it wasn't our fault, that even if we had brought Mom to them earlier, things would have most likely ended up the same way. They said this to us when we got agitated at the hospital, when they wouldn't let us in to see Mom after her operation and we started yelling. A social worker spoke with us in a private room while we waited for permission to see our mother. And when we saw her, her head bandages made her look mummified and her skin looked sickness yellow and it was just so plain horrible, and—based on the concerned looks the hospital staff were giving us—we were visibly terrified.

On our behalf, the social worker asked the doctors whether we could have done anything more to prevent the cancer from growing—had we been negligent? That's when the doctors told us that it wasn't our fault, even though we'd ignored the symptoms for months, pretending away the problems of our lives.

Even still.

It wasn't our fault.

I hope you will believe me, Richard Gere.

It wasn't my fault, nor was it yours.

You sent only one letter, but you were with Mom to the end—in her underwear drawer, and by her side through me, your medium, your incarnation.

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The doctors repeatedly confirmed that fact—that we couldn't have done anything more.

The squidlike brain tumor that had sent its tentacles deep into our mother's mind was not something we could have predicted or defeated, the doctors told us multiple times, in simple straightforward language that even men of lesser intelligence could easily grasp.

It wasn't our fault, Richard Gere.

We did everything we could have done, including the pretending, but some forces are too powerful for mere men, which the social worker at the hospital confirmed with a reluctant and sad nod.

"Not even a famous actor like Richard Gere could have secured better care for his mother," that social worker answered when I brought you up—when I shared my worry of being a failure at life, not even able to take care of his only mother, which was his one job in the world, the only purpose he had ever known.

*Miserable failure!* the tiny man in my stomach screamed at me. *Retard! Moron!*

The brain-cancer squid ended our mother's life only a few weeks or so ago, a short long blur (that stretches and shrinks in my memory) after surgery and chemo failed to heal her.

The doctors stopped treating her.

They said to us—"This is the end. We are sorry. Try to keep her comfortable. Make the most of your time. Say your good-byes."

"Richard?" Mom whispered to me on the night she died. That's all.

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One.

Single.

Word.

*Richard?*

The question mark was audible.

The question mark haunts me.

The question mark made me believe that her whole life could be summed up by punctuation.

I wasn't upset, because Mom had said her last word to the you-me Richard Gere of pretending, which included me—her flesh-and-blood son—too.

I was Richard at that moment.

In her mind, and in my own.

Pretending can help in so many ways.

Now we hear birds chirping in the morning when we sit alone in the kitchen drinking coffee, even though it is winter. (These must be either tough, hardy city birds unafraid of low temperatures, or birds too lazy to migrate.) Mom always had the TV blaring because she liked to “listen to people talk,” so we never knew about the birds chirping before. Thirty-nine years in this house, and this is the first time we ever heard birds chirping in the morning sunlight while we drank our coffee in the kitchen.

A symphony of birds.

Have you ever really listened to birds chirping—really truly listened?

So pretty it makes your chest ache.

My grief counselor Wendy says I need to work on being more social and forming a “support group” of friends. She

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was here in my kitchen once when the morning birds were chirping and Wendy paused midsentence, cocked her ear toward the window, squinted her eyes, and wrinkled her nose.

Then she said, “Hear that?”

I nodded.

A cocky smile bloomed just before she said—as only someone so young could—in this upbeat cheerleader voice, “They like being together in a flock. Hear how happy they are? How joyful? You need to find *your* flock now. Finally leave the nest, so to speak. Fly even. *Fly!* There’s a lot of sky out there for brave birds. Do you want to fly, Bartholomew? *Do you?*”

She said all of those words quickly, so that she was out of breath by the time she finished her cheery cheer. Her face was flushed robin’s-breast red, like it gets whenever she’s making what she considers to be a remarkably extraordinary point. She looked at me wide-eyed—“kaleidoscope eyes,” the Beatles sing—and I knew the response to her call, what I was supposed to say, what would make her so happy, what would validate her existence in my kitchen and make her feel as though her efforts mattered, but I couldn’t say it.

I just couldn’t.

It took a lot of effort to remain calm, because part of me—the evil black core of me where the tiny angry man lives—wanted to grab Wendy’s birdlike shoulders and shake all of the freckles off her beautiful young face while I screamed at her, yelling with a force mighty enough to blow back her hair, “I am your elder! *Respect me!*”

“Bartholomew?” she said, looking up from under her

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thin orange eyebrows, which are the color of crunchy sidewalk leaves.

“I am not a bird,” I told her in the calmest voice available to me at that time, and stared fiercely at my brown shoelaces, trying to remain still.

I am not a bird, Richard Gere.

You know this already, I know, because you are a wise man.

Not a bird.

Not a bird.

Not.

A.

Bird.

Your admiring fan,  
Bartholomew Neil



*THAT GUY HUNG OUT WITH PROSTITUTES*

Dear Mr. Richard Gere,

In order to remedy the gaps in our collective knowledge of each other, I went to the library and googled you on the Internet.

Patrons are permitted to look up anything at the library except pornography. I know because I once saw a man (with gray dreads that made his head look like a dead dusty spider plant) get kicked out for viewing Internet pornography in the library. He was sitting next to me, rubbing his crotch through his filthy, incredibly baggy jeans. On his screen were two naked women on all fours like dogs licking each other's anuses. They kept moaning, "Ewwwww-yeah!" and "Mmmmmm-haaaa-YES!" I remember laughing because it was so ridiculous. The women acting like dogs, not the fact that the man was kicked out.

(Do people really enjoy looking at women behaving in this manner? I find it hard to believe, but if it is on the Internet, there must be a market. And not just crazy library

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patrons either—but people with computers at home, where such viewing is allowed.)

An older librarian came over and said, “This is not appropriate. Sir, you cannot behave this way here. This is entirely unacceptable! There are rules, sir. Sir, please.”

The man yelled at the librarian, refusing to go. He said, “I ain’t no sir! I’m a man! M-A-N MAN! H-U-M-A-N HUMAN B-E-I-N-G!” which made the old librarian jump and take a step back. She did not like his spelling at her.

Everyone in the library had turned and was staring by this point.

I was glad The Girlbrarian was not there to see.

(The Girlbrarian would not have been able to deal with such a situation, and I like that about her. She’s beautifully slow to take action. She thinks about things a lot before she makes a move. I watched her once as she sorted through books that had been damaged. I don’t know for sure, but based on my observations, I guessed it was her job to decide which damaged books should be thrown away and which should be taped together and kept. Most people would have glanced cursorily and quickly tossed each book to its fate one way or the other, right or left, keep or trash, but she examined the books so carefully, turning each over and over like precious dead butterflies that she could maybe open and make fly again if only she were gentle enough. I watched her for three full hours from the other side of the library as I pretended to read the newspaper. It was a miraculous sight to behold, until one of the other librarians came over and yelled at The Girlbrarian for taking so much time. She

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said, “These aren’t gilded in gold, Elizabeth!” The Girlbrarian flinched when the words hit her ears, and she hid in her long brown hair that covers her face like a waterfall can cover the entrance to a mysterious cave. That older librarian sorted through the remaining books in less than five minutes as The Girlbrarian watched through her hair with her shoulders slumped. I saw The Girlbrarian’s hands start to reach for several books as they were tossed into the throw-away pile, but she managed to refrain and her fingers never got more than five or so inches from her white-corduroy-covered thighs. You could tell The Girlbrarian wanted to intervene and argue on behalf of many of the books.)

Have you noticed that far too often the best people in the world lack power, Richard Gere?

China has power.

Tibet lacks power.

Are you impressed with my research into and knowledge of your favorite cause?

When the police arrived, the pornography man—who was most likely homeless, because he smelled like fish guts rotting in an old leather boot—shook his head several times, like he was really dismayed, disappointed even, and then he yelled, “I’ve paid taxes in my life! Dozens of times! Thousands of dollars. I’ve funded the U.S. government, which is your employer! You! And you! And *you!* All of you are government employees! Public servants. You work for *us!* The people! Not the other way around. I am *your* boss. You! *You!* *YOU!*” He pointed his index finger at all of the library workers and policemen. “Now I want my representation! This is

a free country! If I want to look at porno, I can, because it's my constitutional right as an American citizen. Porno for everyone!" The man ranted for some time about how much American presidents loved sex. Bill Clinton's stained dress. Thomas Jefferson making love to his slaves. JFK and Marilyn Monroe. I wrote most of it down in my notebook immediately, because it was interesting, real, spontaneous, even if it remains unconfirmed, and is most likely an exaggeration.

But I recognized something important that most people do not understand: that homeless man was pretending he had the right to speak openly and freely, and pretending can be more important than settling for what is agreed upon as true—what everyone else is holding up as fact. (In this case, the fact was this: homeless men are not supposed to speak to people with homes—especially in a confident manner.) Facts are not always as important as pretending. Pretending gave that man the power he needed that day to speak his mind. Most of the government employees will never speak their minds, which is why they were so afraid of the homeless man. He disrupted their lives with his pornography and interesting presidential proclamations. If only more people pretended for good causes. If only The Girlbrarian could pretend more effectively—she would accomplish many great things, I am sure of it. The problem is that madmen do all of the pretending and action taking. Have you noticed this?

I always write down interesting important things.

I don't look at pornography because I am a Catholic, and I try not to masturbate, but I'm not always successful with my efforts.

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Do you ever masturbate, Richard Gere?

I bet you haven't had to masturbate in a long time—not since you became famous. When you marry a supermodel like Cindy Crawford, you probably don't ever have to masturbate again. (I know you are no longer married to Cindy Crawford, but Carey Lowell. Like I said, I've been researching you.) Why would you even need pornography, with such beautiful women in your home?

Is it wrong for Buddhists to masturbate?

I used to tie my hands to my bedposts—you can do this without help if you practice enough times to master the art of making effective wrist nooses—in an effort to keep from masturbating as I fell asleep at night. But then Mom—who seemed never to tire of liberating me in the a.m., whenever I called out for freedom—reluctantly told me it was better to masturbate than have sex with strange women who have diseases like AIDS and herpes and the flu. She said you can even get the flu from having sex with strangers, and that many people die from the flu every year, which is why we got flu shots at Rite Aid every September.

But Mom also said, if I needed gratification, I should take care of it myself. She said that to me when I was in my twenties and was arrested for trying to solicit a prostitute who was an undercover cop.

Father McNamee arranged for a lawyer to help me and took me to the thrift store to shop for a suit. The men working at the thrift shop were homosexuals, and were—according to Father McNamee—therefore well versed in fashion. They were nice and helped me find the perfect

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courtroom outfit. “How does he look?” Father McNamee asked them when I came out of the dressing room. “Innocent,” one of the homosexuals said, and then smiled proudly.

“Catholics aren’t supposed to approve of homosexuality, right?” I asked Father McNamee when we were walking home.

“Catholics aren’t supposed to get arrested for soliciting the services of prostitutes either,” he said in this terse, almost mean way, even though he knew I was (and even looked) innocent.

“I liked the homosexuals who helped me find my suit. Is that wrong according to the Catholic Church?” I asked. “I just want a definitive answer.”

“Between you and me only—off the record—it’s not wrong,” Father McNamee said. “I liked them too. I’ve known Harvey for thirty years.”

“Who’s Harvey?”

“The owner of the store—and my friend.”

“So you have homosexual friends?”

“*Of course*,” he said, but he sort of whispered it fast.

During a dinner at our home, Mom once said to Father McNamee, “Seventy-five percent of all priests are gay. That’s why the church makes homosexuality a sin. Every rectory would be an all-out Roman orgy if they didn’t.”

They both laughed so hard at that one, maybe because they had been drinking bottles of wine.

When I went to court the judge said it was entrapment, because the cop—who was dressed up in a pink wig and a leather miniskirt and pointy cone bra and the highest heels

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you have ever seen—had stopped me on my way home from the library and rubbed up against my leg, calling me “Big Baby Daddy” (which was confusing, because how can you simultaneously be a baby *and* a daddy?) and asking me for money.

I asked how much she needed, and she said, “Twenty for head. Sixty for anything you want.” (I wrote that down later in my Interesting Things I Have Heard notebook.) No one had *ever* rubbed up against my leg like that before—it felt like I was frozen in time and space, like an ancient caveman trapped in ice or amber maybe—like it was a moment, and so I agreed to give the pink-haired woman some money with a nod, mostly because I thought it would make her happy, and my mouth was too dry to speak.

To be honest, I thought it would make her keep rubbing against my leg too, and that felt really, really good—like I was a stack of pancakes and she was the butter melting on top of me, sliding down. And I also did this because she had hypnotized me with her lips and eyes and mind and her makeup and her smell and her sweat—I wanted her to rub up against my thigh forever.

Pancakes and butter.

It all felt very lucky, like I had won a prize.

But just as soon as I pulled money out of my wallet, all of these men jumped out from behind trees and trash cans—pointing guns and flashing badges and screaming for me to get down on my knees and put my hands behind my head. They had a bullhorn that hurt my ears and made me feel like there were angry wasps tunneling through my mind.

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When they handcuffed my wrists behind my back, I was so afraid, I peed my pants and the cops yelled at me because they didn't want "the piss" to get on the seat of their cruiser. One of them called me "a fucking retard," I remember, because I wrote that down later in my notebook too—and also, I don't like to be called a retard, but have often been called one, which is unfair and maybe even cruel.

He said, "Another fucking retard. He pissed himself. *Look!*"

The men laughed and the woman dressed in the pink wig lit up a cigarette as she rolled her eyes at me and shook her head.

"We should put this pathetic sack of shit out of his misery," said a short cop. He was dressed like a bum, but his badge was hanging around his neck. It shimmered under the streetlights. He had a compact modern pistol in his hand, like what cops on TV carry. I worried that he was really going to shoot me between the eyes, because he looked at me like he didn't believe I should exist, and all he had to do was pull a trigger to make me disappear forever. He had the power.

"I'm sorry," I said, and meant it. I didn't want to be the root of so much trouble. I was starting to believe that the angry cop was right about me. "I didn't mean to cause any inconvenience."

He shook his head disgustedly—like I was dog dirt he had just accidentally stepped in—and then he walked away, scraping me off on the rough cold sidewalk until his sole was completely clean of me.

I hope you have surmised by now that I am not a retard, Richard Gere.



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I am “above average intelligence.”

Mom always told me that, anyway. She said I scored remarkably high on an unconventional IQ test my elementary school required its students to take, but that the world doesn’t always measure intelligence the right way.

“The world likes money better than truth,” Mom also used to say. “So we’re screwed!”

She used to laugh so hard whenever she said that.

“And you’re just a little off,” Mom would say. “Off in the *best* of ways. Perfect the way you are. My beautiful son. Bartholomew Neil. I love you so much.”

My young grief counselor Wendy says I am “emotionally disturbed” and “developmentally stunted” from having lived in a “codependent relationship” with my mother for so many years.

I don’t think Wendy likes Mom very much.

She once said Mom fed off me, which made my mother sound like a cannibal with a bone through her nose, stirring me up in some giant cauldron perched upon a pile of flaming wood.

Mom wasn’t like that at all; she was no cannibal.

This all went into my notebook.

Wendy told me I was “emotionally disturbed” and “developmentally stunted” when I asked why I needed a grief counselor, since I wasn’t really sad anymore that Mom had died—when I told her I had made peace and didn’t cry at night or anything like that. I had no grief to manage. She was wasting her time.

“She died peacefully because of the morphine,” I said. “And I’ll see Mom again in heaven.”

Wendy the grief counselor ignored my mention of heaven. She said, “You say you haven’t even cried yet. *Yet*. You are most likely repressing many emotions.”

“Do birds repress things?” I said, as a joke, keeping my eyes on my shoelaces, and Wendy laughed in a good way that made me feel like I had stumped her with her own metaphor, and was therefore not a retard.

But as I was saying before, Mom had to come get me out of jail, and it took so long that my pants were dry by the time she got there, but my thighs had chapped from rubbing against wet jeans because I was pacing while incarcerated.

There was this interesting Puerto Rican man in my cell wearing makeup and he kept blowing kisses at me and saying he wanted to “cut me gently” whenever the cops weren’t around. I know he was Puerto Rican because he had on a T-shirt that read *PUERTO RICANS FUCK BETTER*. Although maybe he could have been a non-Puerto Rican who just liked to have sex with Puerto Ricans, I suppose. Regardless, it was interesting and unusual, so I wrote it in my notebook.

That night, after she bailed me out of jail and took me home, Mom told me that self-gratification—while it was technically a sin in the Catholic Church, sometimes referred to as the sin of Onan—was probably the path for me. She wasn’t really mad at me for getting arrested, especially after I told her what had happened—how the pink-haired woman had basically jumped out of an alley and began to rub against my leg before I could say or do anything. Mom nodded and said she wished she had told me about self-gratification before all of this happened, but such talks

THE GOOD LUCK OF RIGHT NOW

were usually the job of the father, and my father had died far before I was old enough for sex talks, so Mom really isn't to be blamed.

That night Mom came into my room, sat on the edge of my bed like she used to when I was a boy, pointed above my headboard to the crucifix—her gift to me when I was confirmed—and she said, “That guy hung out with prostitutes. He got arrested too. So you're in good company, Bartholomew. Don't let this rip you apart inside, okay?” When I didn't respond, Mom said, “I wish you had run into a Vivian Ward instead of an undercover cop.” She was referencing Julia Roberts's character in *Pretty Woman*, which I don't have to tell you. “I want more. I want the fairy tale,” Mom said, just like Julia Roberts said to you in the movie. “I want the fairy tale for you, Bartholomew. If I couldn't have it, I want it for you. So keep believing in fairy tales, okay? Keep believing that even some prostitutes are good-hearted women. Believe. Pretend even!” I don't know why—maybe because Mom was always so hopeful for me, and I never could manage to confirm her wild suspicions about her only son—but I had to turn my face away from her. I felt the tears coming, the pressure building up behind my eyes. Mom ran her fingers through my hair for a few minutes, like she did when I was a boy. Even though I was too old to be tucked in like that, I was glad she did what she did. It made the angry man in my stomach fall asleep. It was like her hand was able to perform a miracle that night. “I want the fairy tale for you, my sweet, sweet trusting boy,” she said once more before she turned out the lights and exited my bedroom.

*MATTHEW QUICK*

My father was most likely murdered by Catholic-hating Ku Klux Klan members, and I therefore have no memory of him. People forget that the KKK hated Catholics just as much as they hated Blacks and Jews, once upon a time. Mom said no one cares if you hate Catholics anymore because of all the pedophile priests, which is why people forget that the KKK probably still hates Catholics. (Mom also said if priests keep molesting little boys, the KKK would soon have a higher approval rating than the Catholic Church.) This is also why my father's killer was never brought to justice, according to Mom, nor did any newspapers cover the murder, which is maybe why I couldn't find any record of it at the library.

"It was once very hard for Catholics in this country," Mom used to say when I was a boy. "Your father—a good Catholic man—went out for a pack of cigarettes and never was seen again. The police say he left us for another family up in Montreal, where he was originally from, but we know better."

So Mom did her best and can't really be blamed for my arrest. I once asked her if my father was also a good pretender, and she said he was. Apparently, he was a lot like me.

Why didn't my father get to give Mom the fairy tale?

Why do most people fail to give each other the fairy tale?

Do you know why, Richard Gere?

Has your moviemaking taught you this?

Your admiring fan,  
Bartholomew Neil